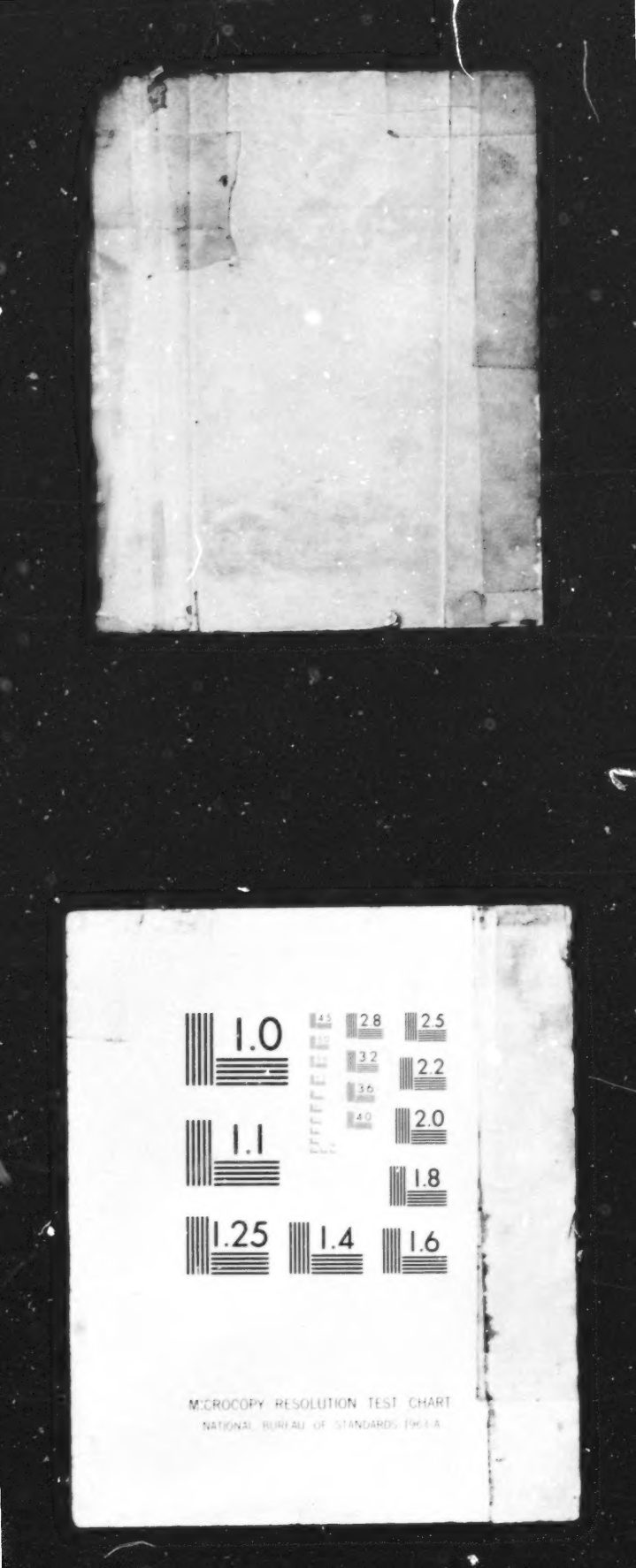
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ABSTRACT

Over the past ten years, language teachers have become adept at using new techniques for teaching culture. Folklore is one resource that has not been fully exploited, but that can lead students to a deeper understanding of culture and, at the same time, involve them in rich language experiences. Use of folklore in the foreign language classroom, besides strenghthening cultural and literary understanding, has distinct advantages for language learning. Folk narrative style is simple and direct and employs colorful imagery, natural dialogue, and the redundancy necessary in the initial stages of second language learning. Folklore can be effectively used as a stimulus to oral or written language. One example of an activity centered around folklore is the "dwarf drama," in which a class divides in groups of two or three to stage 60-second dramatizations of folk proverbs. In addition to the oral elements of folk culture, non-verbal components, such as folk art and gestures, can be studied and demonstrated. (Author/AM)

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THE FORUM

FOLKLORE IN THE FOREIGN LANGUAGE CLASS*

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Over the past ten years language teachers have become adept at using new techniques for teaching culture. Mini-dramas, assimilators, audio-motor units, culture clusters and capsules have proved effective antidotes to ignorance and chauvinism. But what happens when students have swallowed our supply of culture capsules? What do we prescribe the next time they take an overdose of dialogues or come down with endemic ethnocentricity? The prescription we seek should provide a long-range treatment which, although multi-faceted, would offer structure to the study of culture.

One such "remedy" which has been around for a long time--as long as there have been campfires holding back shadows--is folklore. Folklore is born of a fusion of mind and heart. It can lead our students to a deeper understanding of culture and at the same time involve them in rich language experiences. Certainly it is a prescription worth investigating.

The problem is that the prospect of studying folklore does not set off a stampede down the halls of academe. Americans tend to perceive the area from diverse but limited viewpoints. To members of my generation, "folklore" conjures up the beaming Burl Ives -- strummin' and a-hummin' "The Blue Tail Fly." Hard core academicians, on the other hand, view folklore as a pleasant pasttime for anthropologists and the Medieval Studies buffs. To school teachers, folklore equals fairy tales, and they invite Henny Penny and her ilk to babysit when it's too cold to go out for recess. Foreign language teachers may be a bit more sophisticated, but their view of folklore is still limited. To the typical French teacher, folklore covers a short span: it begins with "Frère Jacques" and ends on the bridge at Avignon.

In reality, the area of life covered by the term "folklore" is a broad one. Folklore is the body of material that is handed on by tradition--either by word of mouth or by custom and practice. It may be a story, a joke, a riddle, or a song. It may be the way to play a game, make a stew, or signal to a friend. It includes cures and customs, signs and designs, the "do's" and the taboos of culture. Legends that inspire, tales that terrorize, rhymes to jump rope to--all of these are folklore. If you put them all together you will find that they very closely parallel Nelson Brook's definition of what constitute deep culture: they give our students "an intimate view of where life's action is, where the individual and the social order come together, where self meets life." ("Teaching Culture in the Foreign Language Classroom," Annals, March, 1968, p. 212.)

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Knowing what makes a people laugh, what makes them angry, what stirs their pride or their fear is a crucial step toward understanding that people. In some respects, folklore is superior to literary writing when it comes to mirroring the attitudes of large groups. The building blocks of folk literature are the commonplace, the conventional. A literary work, on the other

hand, is the artistic achievement of one man. Trying to draw cultural generalizations from an individual artistic work is a risky business. It can be done, but the student must always be aware of the unique nature of the author's own idiosyncratic outlook. Folk literature, however, has been circulated down time and through space by those who unconsciously accept its focus. It seems logical that a study of folk materials can illuminate some of the important cultural themes which underlie a people's thought and action.

One point to remember is that only a small percentage of folklore was intended for children. The original audience was adult. Only in the last 200 years has the folktale been prettied up and toned down for presentation in the parlor and nursery. As a quick example of what happens to a folktale in the hands of a literary writer, consider the narrative known to folklore scholars as Tale Type 366. Maybe as a child you remember a story about a teeny tiny woman who found a teeny tiny bone. She took it to her home, which of course was teeny tiny, and made a teeny tiny bowl of soup. That night in bed she heard a teeny tiny voice say, "Give me back my bone. Give me back my bone. GIVE ME BACK MY BONE!" The voice got louder and louder, and when she could endure the suspense no longer, the teeny tiny lady stuck her head out of the bed curtains and screamed, "TAKE IT!" As a child I listened to this story with glee, but I never could see the point to it. The reason is that in the prettying-up process, the point was lost.

An original version of Tale Type 366 was collected from oral circulation in France a few years ago. It dealt with a country maid who had a ravenous craving for meat--raw meat. One day her parents set off for the fair and promised to bring her a present of meat when they returned. Homeward bound at the close of the fair, they realized with a pang that they had forgotten their daughter's gift. The father--an enterprising fellow--cast his eye over the wall of the cemetery they were passing and spotted a freshly dug grave. Ignoring the protestations of his wife, he unearthed the corpse, severed its leg, and carried home the grim "gift" to his daughter. She received it with gluttonous appreciation and contentment filled the cottage. The next day the daughter returned home from the fields to prepare the evening meal. To her horror she found a corpse impaled on the pot hook over the fireplace. It spoke to her through lifeless lips. "Get a cloth, girl, and wash my left leg." Terrified, she did as she was ordered. "Now," said the corpse, "wash my right leg." The girl stammered, "But you have no right leg." "That's right," howled the corpse. "Your father cut it off and you ate it! GIVE ME BACK MY LEG." With this dreadful cry, he seized the girl and dragged her screaming to the waiting grave.

Now this version of Tale Type 366 is a far cry from the teeny tiny woman and the voice that pleaded, "Give me back my bone." I tell it not to imply that the French are cannibalistic or that folklore is the product of sick fantasies. It does make clear, however, that authentic folk tales are not necessarily an art form for the FLES class. They can be studied with appreciation by the most worldly adults.

A knowledge of the various genres of folk literature should be a part of every student's literary expereience. The sonnet and the essay are no more justifiable in the curriculum than the Märchen and the pourquoi tale. Indeed, without a knowledge of folk literature, students will miss many of the subtle references and allusions found in formal literary works. They will also be unaware of the great pool of folk themes and motifs which

are international in scope and express the human hopes and fears that defy geographical boundaries.

Albert Camus' short play, Le Malentendu, provides an excellent illustration of this point. Camus based the plot of his play on a newspaper account of a supposedly true event which had happened somewhere in Czechoslovakia. Haunted by the irony of the alleged "true account," Camus created his play of "The Misunderstanding," in which a long-lost son returns incognito to surprise his family and is murdered by his unsuspecting mother and sister. The same ironic twist of fate was mentioned again in Camus' novel, L'Etranger. He was never aware that this domestic tragedy comes from a folk tale (Type 939A in the Aarne-Thompson Type Index) which has been in oral circulation throughout Europe for hundreds of years and is told even today in southern Ohio with a very American villain named Billy Potts. An awareness of the universality of Camus' plot can lead American students of French to an understanding of the role folklore plays in formal literature.

In addition to strengthening cultural and literary understandings, the use of folk literature in the language class has distinct linguistic advantages. Folk narratives are usually short. They come to the point without tedious digression. The student can read or listen to a tale in one sitting and relish the mood of the contents. The language of folktales is simple and direct. It makes use of forceful similes and employs the vocabulary of everyday exchange. Highflown literary phraseology has no place in the action-oriented folktale. Excellent natural dialogue is readily found, and redundancy, so necessary in the initial stages of language learning, occurs frequently in folk narrative style.

Because tales and legends lie close to the emotions, they make good subjects to stimulate the use of oral language. One day I was having trouble getting the students in a class for prospective French teachers to open up and talk. I cast around for relevant topics that would unloosen their tongues. The current campus political crisis left them cold. State and national headlines stirred not a flicker of response. A storm was brewing outside and a sudden gust slammed the classroom door shut. On a hunch, I rolled my eyes toward the door and asked if anybody present believed in ghosts. The Americans in the class smirked deprecatingly, but a young graduate student from Thailand came to life. With the confidence born of conviction, she told of the time when she and her mother and little brother had climbed to a mountaintop shrine in her homeland to worship. The journey was long, and it was necessary for pilgrims to stay the night in a ring of little huts grouped around the ancient temple. The priest who assigned her family to their hut inquired of the mother if she believed in ghosts. She assured him that she did not, and he pointed out a somewhat isolated hut for their lodging. In the night, as the three lay sleeping, my student felt a hand clutching her bedcovers. Thinking it was her little brother, she sleepily told him to return to his cot. The hand twitched the covers angrily to the floor, and bony fingers closed down on her leg. The girl screamed and her startled mother illuminated a lantern. The little brother was still tucked safely in his own bed, and the hut was empty of earthly intruders. In the morning, the priest confessed that the hut was haunted by the ghost of

an old temple caretaker who had lived there for years and who still, after death, regarded it as his domain. The intensity with which my student believed gave fluency to her French and her fervor was contageous. In less time than it takes to twitch a blanket to the floor, the class was energized. The resultant discussion of ghostlore and hauntings led to improvised dramas for the next two days, with intensive oral language practice that stemmed from a real desire to communicate.

Folklore may also be used as a stimulus for writing. A student who is asked to record a legend or memorat from his own oral traditions is working with a subject that he knows intimately and one which nobody else (especially the teacher) can criticize. The student is the expert and can reveal the details with confidence. Because the narrative is meaningful in his own immediate culture, he wants to "get it across" to his peers. This desire to share is a powerful motivation.

In a class for foreign students studying English at the University of Georgia, the following paragraph was written by a student from El Salvador whose ego was so threatened by his limited linguistic skills that he had previously refused to commit any thoughts to writing.

A Legend From El Salvador: "La Siguanaba"

> In the fields, near the villages, exist a legend about a woman who has long white hair and a horrible face. This woman washing her old clothes at midnight, and sometimes she outburst of laughter. If somebody try to cross a river, in the same time that the Siguanaba is washing her clothes at midnight and if she looks to him--it occurs only with men--he will be transformed into an old man--he losses his voice and mind. -- The true about the Siguanaba is that in the night the racoons go to the river for catch crabs. And, sometimes the crabs bite their hand and the racoons outburst of laughter.

Errors in syntax and morphology are unimportant when weighed against the zest with which this student shared a bit of lore from his own culture. For such a student, the next writing assignment would be infinitely easier to fulfill.

Lest the examples I have used give you the wrong impression, let me assure you that the content of folklore need not be involved with the macabre or the malign. Some of the most humorous moments in my teaching career have come as I shared with students their use of folk materials in language learning activities. Trickster tales, numskull tales, and other light-hearted folk stories provide excellent plots for listening comprehension, narration and dramatics.

One technique which my classes call the "dwarf drama" involves dividing into groups of two or three to stage 60-second dramatizations of folk proverbs. Each group creates a situation which builds to a climax at fantastic speed and is capped with proverb as the curtain ringer. Ground rules stipulate that teams are given only ten minutes to devise

their dwarf dramas, the results are not subject to linguistic criticism, and all dramatic efforts must be warmly applauded. The activity is consequently fast-paced and non-threatening. It provides an excellent review of proverbs, and it makes for the fluent use of language which comes from a guarantee of success.

The non-verbal aspects of folk tradition make up an important part of every culture. Folk gestures can be studied as kinesic elements to be recognized, understood, and perhaps incorporated into the student's own expressive system in the foreign language. Other non-verbal components, such as folk design and folk art forms, can provide a logical focus for language activities. Two girls in one of my high school French classes found it difficult to muster enthusiasm over the passé composé. But they studied the traditional motifs used in provincial French Quimperware, copied them onto cups and saucers which they fired in a kiln, and brought their own "Quimperware" to class with a flourish. As they described to their fascinated classmates how they had reproduced the folk designs, they gave a functional display of the passé composé that was worth far more to us all than the completion of sterile workbook exercises.

This discussion of folklore as a focus for the teaching of culture has touched upon three major benefits. A study of folklore introduces students to the various genres of oral literature and familiarizes them with the motifs of traditional lore. It illuminates cross-cultural similarities and differences with respect to themes and value systems. And, because it is so closely linked with human emotions, it stimulated linguistic production, both oral and written.

The poet Robert Frost has written of "the truths we keep coming back and back to." Perhaps the spectrum of folk materials, which provides a link with the past and a sense of the universal, offers a way to bring these truths into the foreign language classroom.

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*Address given at the joint meeting of the OFLTA/WFLTA, Seattle, Washington, October, 1976.

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